

This In Brief reflects on an incident of political intimidation that occurred after the November 2014 Solomon Islands national election. From this incident it is clear that the local effects of elections extend well beyond the formal events of campaigning, polling day and counting the vote. However, the aftermath of elections at the local level has hardly been researched at all. Therefore, it is necessary to consider what research tools may be useful in observing these ongoing political events. Here I flag the importance of long-term relationships and social media.

As previously documented (Cox 2015), I was an international observer of the Solomon Islands national election in North Vella Lavella constituency. This involved surveying and interviewing voters, observing campaigning and polling and then returning to Gizo where I watched the official counting of the North Vella votes and the declaration of Milner Tozaka as the successful candidate. I was struck by the orderliness of the formal electoral processes and the professionalism of the provincial civil servants as they facilitated voting and counted the ballot papers. Leading up to the election, campaigning had seemed fairly quiet in North Vella. While people reported some intimidation in our surveys, this did not often come up in conversation, nor was there any suggestion of misconduct at the polling station. During the counting of votes, scrutineers had mingled amicably and the representatives of the unsuccessful candidates seemed content with the counting process. Even supporters of Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo, who lost his seat at this election, were peaceable as they streamed out into the streets of Gizo after the results were announced.

Given the apparent procedural orderliness of the elections in Vella and Western Province, it surprised me to hear some months afterwards that someone I had interviewed during the observation had been 'run out of town'. He told me this via social media — we had become Facebook 'friends'. I have chosen not to name him and have changed some minor

details of the story in order to conceal his identity. In January, angry thugs accused him and some other villagers of voting for Milner Tozaka, the successful incumbent, instead of their candidate. By way of reprisal, they stole some of his property and threatened physical violence. At the local school, property donated by Tozaka was destroyed. No serious injuries were sustained. Nevertheless, it was sufficiently frightening for him to leave the village and stay with relatives elsewhere.

According to my informant, disgruntled supporters of one of the unsuccessful candidates had decided to punish anyone in the village who had not voted for their man. Their assumption was that the village would vote as a block. However, after the vote was counted, it was clear that not everyone had voted for the local candidate, sparking these accusations and violence. Quite how the identities of any non-conformists could be ascertained is unclear. The village in question had hosted a polling station where people came from several neighbouring villages to vote. Some travelled from Honiara and others were registered to vote elsewhere. A hefty 73 per cent of voters at this polling station had chosen the local candidate. This was the highest percentage for one candidate in any of the six North Vella polling stations. However, there was no way of knowing who the remaining 27 per cent might have been or which places they may have come from. Perhaps the victims of this post-election intimidation were simply guilty of not showing sufficient grief at the candidate's loss or indignation at Tozaka's success (cf. Wood 2014:8).

There are questions as to whether the Solomon Islands voting process is actually a secret ballot. Each ballot paper has a serial number and each voter's registration number is noted on the counterfoil of the ballot book. It is therefore notionally possible to determine how every individual voted by checking each marked ballot paper against the counterfoil. This has not gone unnoticed by some Solomon Islanders and has been protested in letters to newspapers (e.g. Adifaka

2014). However, it would be extremely difficult if not impossible for an unsuccessful candidate to obtain the relevant ballot boxes and go through the painstaking process of working out who voted for whom.

Moreover, there would be little political value in doing so. In this case, the election had been lost elsewhere, not in the candidate's stronghold. Even if everyone registered at this polling station had voted for him, he still would have lost. To succeed in the future, he will have to win supporters elsewhere, not just consolidate the vote in his heartland. Therefore, I interpret this incident as the hot-headed action of a few frustrated supporters with unrealistic expectations, not a calculated political strategy initiated by the candidate.

That this political intimidation happened months after polling day raises interesting questions for how best to observe elections and related political processes. Hearing about this event has changed some of my impressions of the election and of how candidates campaigned. Responses to survey questions that seemed to exaggerate the level of local intimidation have taken on a new hue. Vella now looks less orderly than it did on polling day. The election is a long event with implications that extend beyond the formal processes. How should we study such extended processes, given that it is not possible to study everything firsthand or to continuously undertake open-ended long-term fieldwork?

From this example, there are two points of relevance for future studies of elections. First, while in the field, I developed a relationship with a key informant that enabled further communication after I left. In this case, the relationship happened to be grounded in a history of interactions going back years and included lateral relationships with other friends, acquaintances and colleagues. This kind of personal connection can only be built up over time but it is important for observation missions to place a high value on long-term relationships: we are likely to get a higher quality (and frequency) of information from people who trust us. Here I acknowledge the assistance of my

friend and informant, who reviewed an earlier draft of this paper.

Second, I learned about this incident through Facebook. Social media is gaining in importance in the Pacific (Logan 2012). Studying Facebook groups such as Forum Solomon Islands International can provide insights into political debates and means of mobilisation (Finau et al. 2014). However, with increasing access to mobile phones, social media can also be used as a research tool that facilitates ongoing contact between researchers and informants. In this way, the distance between the field and the researcher can be bridged, at least in part. As the point above implies, the quality of data communicated online will reflect the quality of relationships established offline. Online communication offers opportunities for maintaining long-term connections with people who academics are at the very beginnings of bringing into their research practice. Future research into elections may benefit from recognising social media as one of several means of maintaining long-term relationships with key informants. This has the potential to open up richer flows of data that will enable more nuanced analysis of the 'long election'.

Author Notes

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